



# The Common

*The newsletter from the Horsell Common Preservation Society*

Volume 6 Issue 1

Summer 2009

## Launching Pegasus

*Photograph by John Durrant*

This Spring Pegasus was launched by Captain Chainsaw and his team of Tree Pirates to the general amazement and delight of all who have seen the winged horse taking off with flaring wings. The energy and power conveyed, together with grace and beauty, is described as magnificent, fantastic, gorgeous and uplifting to the spirits. The old oak was handsome, but was wrecked by a freak tornado. From its remains Pegasus has leapt to life.

## Report from our new Chairman David Robbins

Your new Board of Trustees which you elected at the Annual General Meeting has appointed me as the Chairman for the forthcoming year. It is a daunting prospect since every year throws up new challenges and it will be difficult to fill John Durrant's shoes. As you may know, he threw himself into the task of running the Society with huge energy and kept the ship steady through some significant storms and challenges. I would like to thank John again for all his work for the Society during his time as our Chairman. It was John who ensured that we were well advised professionally on the process of appointing our first full time paid manager. As a result I believe the selection process was fair and equitable. Having appointed Paul Rimmer in that role we are beginning to realise that having a full time employed Manager was a large and important step forward for the Society. The management process for a body like ours has become so much more complex both legally and environmentally. We will see how things progress over the years ahead but I am sure you will see significant improvements.

The other recent development, which you may be aware of, is the latest planning application from McLaren. They want to build a car production facility or factory on the open land between their existing Technology Centre and the southern boundary of their site which would position it right on our boundary. Do please examine the application and if



you feel it appropriate make an objection to Woking Borough Council. Whilst the potential for new jobs will no doubt be welcomed, I think it is our job to protect the Green Belt and more specifically the Common. The Company's plans will seek to shield the building from the road and the parkland behind but there is no doubt that the openness of this part of the Green Belt will be severely compromised. It is particularly upsetting for the Society since, when the plans for the Technology Centre were passed, we received promises that this land would remain open and unbuilt. I hope you will understand our position in this matter since I have no doubt there may be some adverse publicity. Your Board of Trustees will be considering this issue very carefully as the saga unfolds and I will keep you informed.

I refer to the 'Board of Trustees' because your committee members are now Directors of Horsell Common Preservation Society as well as being Charitable Trustees.

## Horsell Common, then and now

A hundred years ago Horsell Common was a very different place to what it is now. It would have been grazed permanently by cattle, and possibly other animals, so that there were very few if any trees. There were probably no pines but a few oaks and birch trees. There was also probably a lot more bare ground due to trampling by cattle. The sandpit was being actively worked, creating a large area of bare sand, and the horse carts going to and from the pit would also have created wide sandy tracks across the common. Nowadays the pit is partly overgrown with trees and most of the tracks are narrow and shaded out by pines.

A hundred years ago the common, and especially the sandpit, became one of the most famous entomological sites in Britain, due to one man, Edward Saunders. He worked at Lloyds of London, the insurers, and moved to St Anne's, Mount Hermon Road, Woking in 1887, partly to be near the station for the City but also to be near Horsell Common, which he already knew. Saunders was an amateur entomologist and at that time was studying bees and wasps, a subject on which he had already become the leading authority in Britain. In 1896 he published the first and only identification book on British bees and wasps, which contains many references to captures of rare species on the common. This book encouraged many hymenopterists from all over the country to visit the common and he soon had a circle of enthusiasts who would bring or post

specimens to him for identification. As a result, a large number of rarities were found on Horsell Common.

Today the common is still well known as a good site for bees and wasps but it is only a shadow of its former self. There are modern records of 83 bee species and 81 wasp species but in Saunders time there were about 95 bees and 120 wasp species. Some were extreme rarities, none of which have been found in recent years. Today, there are far too many trees, especially pines, and not enough bare, open, sunny sand. The majority of bees and wasps need bare compacted sand, either level or vertical, in which to nest; most of the others nest in holes in dead wood. I have been most impressed with the work which has recently been done to clear trees from the sandpit which will certainly help the insects but large areas of pine on the common need to be removed and wider paths need to be scraped to create more nesting sites. Hopefully the common will soon revert to its former glory.

David Baldock is the author of *Bees in Surrey*, published 2008 by the Surrey Wildlife Trust, ISBN 978-0-9556188-1-9 £16. For further details, see <http://www.surreywildlifetrust.co.uk/Default.asp?mainmenu=publications&EntityID={336AF739-D820-4E88-BB49-E0FA78FCD2D2}>

The pictures used with this article are © Jeremy Early. More of his pictures of heathland insects, some taken on Horsell Common, can be seen on [www.natureconservationimaging.com](http://www.natureconservationimaging.com)



*Hairy-legged mining bee*



*Spider-hunting wasp with prey*

### **Conservation Volunteers Programme for Horsell Common 2009/2010**

*Take place on the second Sunday of the month 10am to 1pm on the following dates*

**2009 - 13 September, 11 October, 8 November, 13 December,**

**2010 - 10 January, 14 February, 14 March.**

We meet in Anthony's disused car park. Off A320. Opposite Sands at the Bleak PH. Entrance track on to Anthony's leads to GREEN bar gate and the car park. **Grid Reference TQ015610**

Direction signs will be posted at car park entrance. The group leader is Keith Bowden Tel: 01483 750237

*If the weather is particularly bad please contact him before 09.30 on the day.*

## Painted Ladies on Grasslands

From 24th to the 26th May 2009 Grasslands experienced an invasion from North Africa, of that most beautiful butterfly, the Painted Lady. I have been informed that during the previous week hordes of these butterflies were massed in Northern France ready to invade the UK and beyond. These great invasions were first recorded in 1875. On most occasions that the mass migration took place it was preceded by a wet spring.

On my visit to Grasslands on 26th May 2009 I counted 42 Painted Ladies in one and a half hours. Since 2003 I had only ever seen a maximum of seven of that species for the complete season.

This butterfly has very good camouflage like the Grayling butterfly, except whilst at rest it generally displays its lovely orange, pink, and black open wings. However, certainly in windy conditions, it will tuck fore wings between hind wings displaying blotches of silver, black and white, to mimic silver

birch trunks or ground leaf and twig litter. Please see photograph A which illustrates the camouflage. The flight of the spring migration is swift and powerful as it travels north. This butterfly feeds avidly from any good source of nectar, so it is very much a garden butterfly. That is until it has sourced a feeding plant for its eggs and caterpillars, which is usually any type of thistle. It has also been reported to feed on mallow, stinging nettles and everlasting wallflowers.

Photograph B in fact shows the butterfly taking in the sun and feeding on an everlasting wallflower.

Each later descendant takes up a regular territory, just a few square metres in size, which it patrols in short rapid flights, pausing to bask on bare land, or tree trunks. These pitches last for 10 days or so, it then flies off to find another habitat to patrol. The life span of these butterflies is two to three months.

In the autumn the butterflies that were born here migrate to the heat of North Africa or die in the colder weather.

*Lee Slatter*



*Photograph A*



*Photograph B*

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# Around the Common

*by Paul Rimmer Estate Manager*

## The Bedser trail update

The construction of an Easy Access footpath leading from the Monument Road car park has progressed well since work began in February of this year.

Our aim is to create a circular route of 1200 metres around Woodham Common that can be accessed by all, and also provide links to the Basingstoke canal towpath and the town centre.

The work is being carried out by volunteer groups from the local community, plus specially arranged days for local companies to contribute their time and skills. So far, over 147 man days of volunteer labour have been worked on the project.



*Corporate volunteers from Eli Lilly*

Some good fortune also came our way with over 130 tonnes of surplus hoggin gravel being donated by the contractors working on a local cable laying project for EDF Energy, saving over £3000 in materials.

The project is being jointly managed by HCPS and the Surrey Wildlife Trust; If you would like to take part in one of our volunteering days, then please contact me on 07860 712503 or Tasha Feddery from SWT on 07891 514575. more information on dates is also available from our website.

### **Something fishy in the sandpit pond!**

Three Koi Carp with a value of around £150 have been mysteriously placed in the pond at the sand-pit. A phone call was received from a member of the public in May, advising us that a large Golden Carp, approximately 18 inches in length, had been spotted in the pond. A contractor working on the common, Adrian Marsden, had no trouble in rescuing the fish as it protruded from the shallow water of the pond, which dries out completely in the hot summer months. More reports of sightings were received the following week and a further 2 smaller fish were rescued.

We have no idea who would have put the fish in the pond or why, as they would certainly have died had they not been rescued. All three fish have now been relocated to garden ponds and are doing well.



*Paul and Adrian with two of the rescued fish.*

### **BBC film the Muslim Burial Ground**

The BBC Religious Affairs Unit are making a film about the involvement of Indian troops on the Western Front during the First World War. Series Producer Rob Cowling said "The programme will focus on letters sent from the front line. There is very little tangible evidence of the sacrifice the troops made, so it will be fantastic to film the Muslim burial ground on Horsell Common". The programme is due to be screened in September to coincide with Ramadan.

*Right Nick Holden-Sim and Rob Cowling from the BBC filming at the Muslim Burial Ground*

## **Littlewick Common**

In the wooded area known as Littlewick Common, to the north of Littlewick Road near Knaphill, are several ponds. These have been identified by the Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group (SARG) as an important breeding site for the great crested newt. This is the largest and rarest of the three newt species found in Britain. The quality of these ponds had deteriorated as they were suffering from an accumulation of silt and excessive shading. With funding from the Horsell Common Preservation Society, SARG and Woking Borough Council, work was carried out by contractors and volunteers during the winter of 2008/9 to improve the two largest ponds on Littlewick Common.

A mechanical digger was used to scrape out silt from the pond by the chapel nursery school and overhanging branches have been cut back. The other pond, known as the island pond, was not dug out but volunteer working parties spent two days cutting back the trees and shrubs that were shading the water. Both ponds were dry at the time when the work was carried out.

In the following months, the winter rains have filled both ponds to capacity. An inspection of the ponds in March found that they were being used by both great crested newts and the smaller palmate newt. The more open aspect of the ponds should now also increase the variety of insects and other wildlife in these ponds.

*Andrew Halstead*

### **Common Fires Advice from Surrey Fire Brigade**

*If a fire does break out on the Common.*

Do not put yourself in danger - a sudden wind change could put you on the wrong side of a rapidly developing fire.

Call the Fire Service - use your mobile phone if you have one, but make sure you know where you are so that you can give accurate directions for us to follow.

Send someone, or go yourself, to the nearest track, gate or road, to guide the first fire engine to arrive.

